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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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A-ONE #0846 11/17/06

~ Web Courses Sees Rise! ~ People Are Talking! ~ Sun Sets 'Duke' Free!
~ eBay Joins With Baidu! ~ Content Filters Fail! ~ The Dull Men's Club!
~ Spyware Operation Shut ~ Microsoft To Comply? ~ Lycos Seeks Rebirth!
~ MS To Issue Domains! ~ Anti-Phishing Browsers ~ Google Sends Out Worm!

-* PS3 Buying Frenzy & Violence *-
-* Bootleg Vista and Office 2007 Appear *-
-* Firm’s Anti-Gay E-Mail Sparks Online Fury! *-

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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, as I’m sure that Joe will mention further on, Thanksgiving is almost upon us. By far, this holiday has to be a diner’s paradise of feasts! I always look forward to cooking the turkey and all of the fixings. Sitting down and enjoying the resulting meal is tremendous! And then, all of the leftovers! I can’t wait! It will just be my wife and I this year, and of course, the "kids" will be there begging for scraps. My mouth is already watering!

I haven’t written many comments pertaining to the gaming section of the magazine in a long time. But, with the holidays approaching, and the big three coming out with new consoles, there’s all kinds of stories teeming. There were a couple of things that struck me this past week. First, there are the game console fanatics who line up at stores days before the item goes on sale, hoping they’ll be one of the "chosen few" to get one of the first machines to become available. I guess you have to be a fanatic to wait in the cold and rain to buy something like this. But, the idea isn’t all that strange, I guess. People do the same thing to buy concert tickets and special sporting events. It’s different.

Well, like console debuts in the past, people were lining up days in advance of the release of the PlayStation 3. At $500 - $600 for a console, there were still huge lines at every available outlet. The unusual aspect of this year’s insanity event of the year was that in Connecticut, a couple of teens (okay, a couple of punks) came upon a group of waiting gaming enthusiasts to rob them of their PS3 money. One waiting customer refused to give up his money and, as a result, was promptly shot twice. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think an expensive new game console is worth almost dying. It’s a shame that something like this had to happen, but I’m not surprised to hear something like this happened. And I’m surprised that it hasn’t happened sooner. I wonder if this customer will end up getting his new PS3.

Well, back to the season, all of us here at A-ONE wish you and yours a very happy Thanksgiving holiday. I hope that there will be enjoyable gatherings of family and friends. It’s a great time of year.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, Thanksgiving is now less than a week away, and there's a mutant Butterball turkey sitting in my freezer as I type this. It's a big 'un... almost 26 pounds. That's a lot of bird.

If you remember last week's installment, I was obsessing over having the wife's family here for Turkey-Day. I'm not so obsessive this week, but I'm sure that I'll have bouts between now and then.

For now, I'm content just to know that I don't have to worry about finding a bird big enough to feed everyone.

While that sucker defrosts in the fridge, let's take a look at the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

'Ryan' asks for help with the cable to the POWER LED on his MegaSTE:

"When taking apart my Atari MEGA STE I disconnected the power LED cable from the logic board, carefully noting where it had been plugged in and in which orientation the cable had attached. When reassembling, I plugged the cable back in again, but was unhappy to see that the LED did not turn on. Opening the case again, I realized why: at the *other* end of the cable, the one near the LED, one wire had come loose.

http://ryandesign.com/tmp/atari-mega-ste-power-led-cable.jpg

Can someone with a working MEGA STE power LED tell me where I need to solder that red wire to make it work again?"

Mark Bedingfield tells Ryan:

"OK, undo the screw on the bottom of that steel bracket. Inside the bezel (rubber thingy) and you will see a bog standard LED. You will have to remove the LED, strip back the wire, resolder and insulate the joint. Fixed."

'super stonic' asks a straight-forward question about st disk files and PC discs:

"Can someone explain how to go about how to port over ST files into a format that's readable on a PC?"

'PJ' replies:

"this is pretty good: http://www.ppest.org/atari/floimgd.php "

Everyone’s favorite techie, Alison, adds:

"Use a PARCP cable. Certainly one of the most reliable and predictable methods. Search for PARCP."

stonic replies:

"Thanks pj and Alison- that’s exactly what I was looking for! Nice to know there are some knowledgeable/helpful folks here."

’STcomp’ asks about fixing up a game:

"Hi, I am an Atari ST game collector, and gamer, and I was lucky enough to get my hands on a mint condition Hard N Heavy original disk box and manual. Unfortunately, somebody copied some crappy midi files on to the original disk. :(However the disk is in good condition still, and I happen to also have an original Hard N Heavy disk from a re-line compilation. :) (which should have the identical code and format)

My question is: is the copy protection tough on Hard N Heavy, or might it be possible for me to restore the erased original Hard N Heavy disk with my other Hard N Heavy original disk?

Would I need special copy software? Perhaps a discovery cart (is that what they were called?) Thanks in advance for any info!"

Mark Bedingfield tells him/her:

"Give it a try and see if it works. Try using fast copy if that is no go see if you can get a copy of A-copy and use that."

STcomp replies:

"I just tried Fcopy and Acopy and neither one worked. If anyone out there can help me figure out how to copy Hard N Heavy I would appreciate it. In the mean time I’ll keep fiddling around with stuff."

Ronald Hall adds:

"It s a bit more involved, but if you have, or can get a 2nd floppy drive (SF314 preferably), then find or make a Blitz cable. Using the Blitz software/cable combo, you can copy most protected floppy disks.

It s as simple as putting the original floppy in Drive A and the target floppy in Drive B and running the software.

The Blitz combo bypasses the ST’s floppy drive controller, circumventing almost all forms of floppy disk based protection."

’Ian’ asks about ’Atari ROMs’:

"Just wondering what might be on these ROM’s. They are official Atari ROM’s, type AM 1 8517MAA

The numbers on the ROM's are
C026035-01 (with a '10' marked in tipex)
and
C026034-01 (with a '80' marked in tipex)
any ideas?"

Rodolphe Czuba tells Ian:

"These are BOOT ROM for ATARI ST without TOS.... the first ST were furnished like this and the TOS was loaded for a disk.
These ROMS contain a very nice screen with 512 colors cycling back and a floppy drive SF314 image (bitmap !)...

I love this because it remembers me the first time I use an ST...in 1986...

34 & 35 are for a country...several different countries are existing with different terminations like -32 & 33 by example.

I have the files if somebody want to use..."

John Smith adds:

"yep, disk tos was pretty useless - I think you had about 200K left...oh and it bombed rather a lot - or rather 'mushroom clouded'....

I seem to recall some demo used that screen if anyone wants to see what an early st boot up looked like....

damn, what was the demo called....."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time same station, when I'll be able to give you a firsthand report on how our Thanksgiving festivities went... I know you'll be interested. 'Till then, keep your ears open so you'll hear what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Playstation 3 Debuts in US and Japan!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Game Industry: Ready To Rumble!
Sonic Turns 15! PS3 Insanity!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

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Sony’s PlayStation 3 Debuts In Japan

Sony’s PlayStation 3 made its highly anticipated debut to long lines in Japan on Saturday, marking the first launch of what’s expected to quickly become a global sellout.

Throngs of people lined up for several hours around Bic Camera, an electronics retailer in downtown Tokyo, to get their hands on one of the video game consoles. It sold out even before the store opened at 7 a.m., and would-be buyers were turned away from the store.

Plagued with production problems, Sony Corp. has managed to ready only 100,000 PlayStation 3 machines in time for its debut in Japan. When it goes on sale in the United States on Nov. 17, some 400,000 PS3 consoles will be available there. The sales date has been pushed back in Europe until March. "Standing in line today is the only way to make sure I got one," said Takayuki Sato, 30, among the buyers who queued up at Bic Camera, snaking around the building in a complete circle.

The enthusiasm was so great, clerks with megaphones asked the crowd to stop pushing, warning that all sales would end if there were any injuries. The retailer refused to say how many machines it had, but said it could estimate the number of buyers by the length of the line around the building, and knew they had sold out.

Powered by the new "Cell" computer chip and supported by the next-generation video format, Blu-ray disc, the console delivers nearly movie-like graphics and a realistic gaming experience.

But game makers like Sony must recoup the exorbitant development costs for the machines by selling software, and programming its cutting-edge hardware is a costly and time-consuming task. Only five games were on sale for the PS3’s Japan launch date.

Sony expects to lose $1.7 billion in its gaming division in the fiscal year through March 2007.

The red ink is coming at a time when the Japanese electronics and entertainment company, known for the Walkman portable audio player and "Spider-Man" movies, is struggling to stage a comeback.

In recent years, Sony has fallen behind in key products like flat-panel TVs and digital music players. But it has been making progress with a two-year revival by getting back to basics in its consumer electronics operations.

But a major fumble in its PS3 business could prove a huge blow at a time when it’s seeing its brand image badly tarnished by a massive global recall of lithium-ion batteries for laptops.

In an unprecedented move, Sony slashed the price for the cheaper PS3 model in Japan ahead of its launch by 20 percent to about $420 in what some critics have scorned as a desperate effort to maintain market share in the face of intense competition with Nintendo Co.’s Wii console and Microsoft Corp.’s Xbox 360. Wii goes on sale Nov. 19 in the U.S. and Dec. 2 in Japan.

The Xbox 360 has had a year start.

Tatsuya Mizuno, analyst for Fitch Ratings in Tokyo, believes it will be hard for Sony to maintain the 70 percent market share domination it has built with previous PlayStation consoles, and Sony will likely lose some of that market to rivals, especially Nintendo. Sony has sold more than 200 million PlayStation series machines over the years.

The PS3 was initially promised for worldwide sales for spring this year but was postponed in March to November. In September, the European sales date was delayed by another four months.

Although Sony is sticking to its plan to ship 6 million PS3 machines worldwide by the end of March next year, Mitsuhiro Osawa, analyst for Mizuho Investors Securities Co., thinks Sony may fall short of that target.

"There may not be enough machines to go around, and people will buy Wii and Xbox," Osawa said. "For all you know, it may take Sony five years to get back the money it's invested in PS3, even 10 years if it doesn't watch out."

Person Shot In Line For PlayStation 3

Two armed thugs tried to rob of line of people waiting to buy the new Playstation 3 gaming console early Friday and shot one who refused to give up the money, authorities said.

The two confronted a "bunch of people who were in line" outside a Wal-Mart store shortly after 3 a.m. and demanded money, said Lt. J. Paul Vance, a spokesman for the state police. The new Sony consoles are selling for around $500 to $600.

"One of the patron's resisted. That patron was shot," Vance said.

He said the two gunmen fled, and the victim was taken to University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester. There was no immediate word on the victim's condition.

Vance said police were searching for the suspects.

With Sony promising only 400,000 systems for the nationwide launch, the chance of disappointment was high. While retailers tried to keep expectations low, lines snaked around the block at many stores - even those that weren't going to begin sales until later Friday.

Short supplies and strong demand were feared to be a formula for trouble as the PS3 hit store shelves, a half-year late because of problems completing work on the console's built-in, next-generation DVD player.

In Palmdale, Calif., authorities shut down a Super Wal-Mart after some shoppers got rowdy late Wednesday. In West Bend, Wis., a 19-year-old man was injured when he ran into a pole racing with 50 others for one of 10 spots outside a Wal-Mart.

A Best Buy in Boston, aware it had only 140 of the consoles, got smart - employees gave out tickets to the first 140 people in line so everyone

could go home.

At San Francisco's Sony Metreon mall, a "sacred scroll" notebook kept track of the first 505 people in line so they could go to the bathroom or pick up food without losing their spots. Some got wristbands guaranteeing a unit.

There was even a vibrant economy in Mount Laurel, N.J. Restaurants not only delivered pizza and wings, but also dispatched workers to hand out menus. The Dick's Sporting Goods store nearby sold camp chairs and more than a few tents.

Even as retailers drummed up publicity by throwing parties and inviting celebrities, Best Buy Co. Inc., Circuit City Stores Inc. and others warned customers all week that supplies would be tight.

Sony promised the 400,000 machines in the United States for Friday's launch and about 1 million by year's end. Worldwide, it was expecting 2 million this year, half its original projections.

Jack Tretton, executive vice president at Sony Computer Entertainment America, said retailers will be receiving new PlayStations daily - expedited by plane rather than ships.

"At some point we want to get to some degree of normalcy, but that remains to be seen," Tretton told The Associated Press, adding that seeing all the people camped out and lined up for the console "kind of makes all the effort worth it."

Enthusiasm for the PlayStation 3 wasn't dampened by its high price tag - $500 for the basic model with a 20-gigabyte hard drive and $600 for the 60-gigabyte version, which also has built-in wireless.

By contrast, Nintendo Co.'s Wii, which goes on sale Sunday in the U.S., retails for $250. Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360, which had a year's head start over rivals, sells for $300 to $400.

Sony crammed the PlayStation 3 with the very latest in cutting-edge technology, and it dominated the previous generation of consoles with 70 percent of the global market.

At a midnight launch event at a Circuit City in New York, Sergio Rodriguez was the first to walk away with the PS3 as people still standing in line outside the store cheered. He had been waiting outside since Sunday.

"This is the best game ever. It's so worth the wait," the 25-year-old graphics designer said. "Some people may call me crazy, but I really love to play."

Saby Madrigal, an 18-year-old college student who worked for a month at a liquor store to save for a PS3, waited in line outside the Circuit City for 24 hours without success. Still, she vowed to keep looking.

"For the work we had to do to get all the money to get the stupid system, I'm going to search every single store in town," she said. "I don't care, I'm going to get it."

Some who saw long lines at the midnight launches simply went to another location, with later openings and smaller crowds. Nonetheless, about 50 people were in front of Ahmad Mustafa, 24, outside a New York Best Buy

with only 34 units available.

Nathaniel Lord, who camped out for three nights at a Best Buy in West Hollywood, Calif., spent more than $700 on a console and game.

"I thought about going home to shower first because I haven’t showered in three days, but I think I’m just going to get another energy drink, log on and get started," said Lord, a recent graduate of California Institute of the Arts.

Sony, which has contended with laptop battery recalls and trails rivals in key products such as music players and liquid crystal displays, is counting on the PS3 to maintain and build its market lead in consoles.

Some customers were buying PS3 machines for themselves or as gifts, but many were hoping to resell them at a profit. Units were fetching several thousand dollars early Friday at the eBay Inc. auction site.

James Salterio, 27, explained the reason for his two-day camp-out outside a west Houston Target Corp. store: Greed.

"I’m gonna sell mine," Salterio said, figuring he could make anywhere between $1,500 and $4,000. His 21-year-old brother, a gamer, wanted company in line, so Salterio decided to make a profit in the process.

"It’s capitalism at work," he said.

Edgar Alcala, 18, who grabbed one of the first spots in line at San Francisco’s Sony Metreon Mall on Wednesday morning, said he was looking forward to a warm, dry bed - and a hefty profit.

"When I get home, I’m going to take a quick picture of it, slap it on eBay and go to sleep," Alcala said minutes before the store’s doors opened at midnight Friday.

Nintendo Hopes for Wii Console Comeback

Nintendo brought the world the mustachioed plumber Super Mario and has sold nearly 200 million Game Boy handheld machines over the years. It’s also been coaxing the elderly and other video-game novices to try out puzzles and virtual pets on its DS portables instead of the standard shoot-em-up and sports games.

Now the Japanese pioneer of video games is about to embark on its biggest push in home consoles in years with a machine called Wii that puts simplicity above fancy graphics and computing horsepower.

Nintendo Co. is banking on the Wii’s remote-controller wand that can be swung around like a tennis racket, fishing pole, drumstick or orchestra baton in easy-to-play games that are expected to appeal to a wider audience than young males. It goes on sale Sunday in the United States and Dec. 2 in Japan.

If all goes well, Nintendo could win back some of the market share it once had in the business with its original 1983 console Family Computer, or Famicom, which was sold in the U.S. as Nintendo Entertainment System.

Nintendo is sticking with its historical fun-and-games roots as a toy maker in positioning itself against offerings from Microsoft Corp., a U.S. software company pushing Internet capabilities of its console, and Sony Corp., a Japanese electronics maker that has ruled the console gaming business since the mid-1990s.

Nintendo dates back to 1889, when it made Japanese-style "hanafuda" playing cards decorated with plum blossoms, pine trees and full moons, before moving on to Western style decks of cards and other modern toys.

After pioneering the video game business in the 1980s, Nintendo built up a host of powerful in-house game software offerings, including "The Legend of Zelda," "Kirby" and "Donkey Kong" series, as well as Super Mario and Pokemon - all offered only on Nintendo systems.

But that didn’t stop Nintendo from being toppled as the industry leader in home consoles with the arrival of Sony’s original PlayStation.

Sony’s empire grew even bigger with the PlayStation 2, and Sony has sold more than 200 million PlayStation series machines over the years. It is estimated to control as much as 80 percent of the global home console market.

The successors to the Famicom and Super Famicom - Nintendo 64 and GameCube - couldn’t keep up in part because rivals labeled them as machines for younger children. Nintendo shipped a cumulative 32.9 million Nintendo 64 machines, and 21.2 million Game Cubes worldwide.

But Nintendo branched out and scored success in portable game machines with its Game Boy and Game Boy Advance, and most recently with Nintendo DS that features a touch-panel screen. Nintendo has sold 26.8 million DS machines since late 2004 at a rate that’s growing faster than any game machine ever.

The DS also broke new ground by offering different types of games, including ones that involved caring for a virtual pet, studying cooking recipes and tackling brain-teasing puzzles. Wii, Nintendo hopes, will continue that trend.

And some analysts are betting on Wii as a surprise winner during the

year-end shopping season.

For one, it’s defying past stereotypes of the young male geek audience in reaching out aggressively to older people, women and others who may be intimidated by the complex button-pushing required for most existing games.

Hiroshi Kamide, director of research at KBC Securities Japan, believes Wii will not only convert new gamers but also win over PlayStation and Microsoft Xbox fans, who may buy Wii in addition to the latest upgrade PlayStation 3. The PS3 debuts in the U.S. on Friday.

"The Wii will expand the market pie and grow in that sense, but also actually be the second console of choice for all the core gamers," he said, adding that Wii’s success will depend on how well it does on both counts.

"It will be very interesting to see how much the market pie grows because of the Wii. But it is still a game console at the end of the day," Kamide said.

Wii already has a pricing advantage at $250 (euro195), or about half the

price of the PlayStation 3 at about $500 (euro390) or $600 (euro469), depending on the model. The Xbox 360, which launched last year, sells for $300 (euro234) to $400 (euro312).

Nintendo also is preparing more machines. Company spokesman Yasuhiro Minagawa said nearly 400,000 Wiis will be available for the Japan launch date, and likely more for the U.S. launch.

Sony had just 100,000 PS3s for the Japan launch, and 400,000 consoles in the U.S. for Friday's debut. (Its European launch has been pushed back until March because of production problems.)

Nomura Securities Co. analyst Yuta Sakurai believes PlayStation's domination in the industry will get watered down with the arrival of Wii, estimating Nintendo will sell 40 million machines compared with 70 million PlayStation 3 consoles in the next five years.

More critically, the profit is also likely to be better for Nintendo, as Sony is losing money for every PS3 console it sells until it gets a return on its massive investments, he said. "It's nonsense to measure success by how many machines you sold," Sakurai said. "If it's failing as a business, then it's a failure. Nintendo is doing a fantastic job maintaining profitability."

Sony is expecting to rack up 200 billion yen ($1.7 billion, euro1.3 billion) in red ink in its game unit for the fiscal year ending March 2007, much of it in startup costs for PlayStation 3. By contrast, Nintendo is forecasting profit of 100 billion yen ($845 million, euro660 million) for the fiscal year, as Wii buoys earnings in the second half.

Nintendo also creates most of its game software for its machines in-house, which contributes to hefty profit. Sony has outside companies making much of its game software.

Nintendo spokesman Yasuhiro Minagawa says the company's name, which means "trusting in luck," believed to refer to hanafuda cards, is telling today in the gaming business.

"You do everything you can. Beyond that, it's luck," he said. "Winners and losers in entertainment aren't decided by reason alone. Trends come and go, and sometimes great things don't sell. It's all so whimsical."

Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo Get Ready To Rumble

The $30 billion video game industry's own war of the titans reboots this week with the U.S. launch of Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 3 on Friday and the debut of Nintendo Co. Ltd.'s Wii on Sunday.

A limited supply, delayed debut and drop in the number of games built exclusively for the new PS3 could choke market leader Sony's quest for mainstream hearts and dollars until after the crucial holiday season, a far different scenario from the last console battle when Sony beat key rivals to market.

"It's a significantly more competitive market this time," said Yankee Group video game analyst Michael Goodman, adding that many parents are not brand loyal and will not let Christmas pass without a console for the gamer on

their list.

Initial supplies of the PS3 are expected to quickly evaporate and Goodman and others expect Microsoft Corp. and its one-year-old Xbox 360 to be the main beneficiary of the resulting spill-over in demand.

While minor shortages can create beneficial media buzz, Sony's shortage is so severe that its rivals stand to gain, Eric Johnson, a professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, told Reuters.

Johnson predicted that holiday shoppers who are unable to bag a PS3 may just grab the Xbox 360 instead: "My thought is that Microsoft is the real winner this Christmas."

Both the PS3 and Xbox 360 have advanced graphics and faster microchips to handle more on-screen action and deliver characters that look more lifelike than ever. Nintendo's Wii does not compete for computing power but has a remote control that can be swung like a tennis racquet or sword, and at $250 costs less than half the $600 price for the top-line PS3 and significantly less than the $400 high-end Xbox 360, making it a potential spoiler.

Sony, which dominates the global console market with its current-generation PlayStation 2, has forecast global PS3 shipments of 2 million by the end of calendar 2006.

Microsoft expects to have shipped five times as many Xbox 360s by December 31, while Nintendo is targeting 4 million units.

In the year since its launch, Microsoft's Xbox 360 has made significant inroads in the U.S. market that accounts for more than one-third of overall video game sales, attracting 4 million subscribers to its console-connected online gaming service Xbox Live and creating buzz with exclusive new titles like Epic Games' "Gears of War."

Take-Two Interactive Software Inc.'s blockbuster "Grand Theft Auto" games were heavy hitters on the PS2 but the newest iteration will be released on both the PS3 and the Xbox 360, which is getting extras for Xbox Live users.

Video game publishers are hitting their stride on the Xbox 360, having had time to get to know the new technology. Industry watchers expect to see a similar ramp with PS3 games.

Price is also a big issue for consumers and businesses.

Some gaming enthusiasts say they are limiting themselves to one of the more expensive machines or waiting for prices to fall before taking the plunge. Game makers face new game costs of around $20 million for the PS3 and Xbox 360 - roughly double the previous price - and some are holding off such investments until there is a big enough audience to justify the expense.

As publishers cover their bets, they also are leveling the competitive landscape by forgoing exclusives in favor of turning out the same title for both the PS3 and the Xbox 360.

Goodman predicted that by 2011, Sony will control 45 percent to 50 percent of the U.S. console market, but that Microsoft will significantly narrow the gap with projected share of 38 percent to 48 percent.

"Every time you enter a console transition it's an incredibly competitive

time. This is the point where market share is up for grabs," Goodman said.

PlayStation 3 Won’t Run Some Older Games

Sony’s new PlayStation 3 can’t play some of the games designed for previous generations of the popular console, the latest misstep for the stumbling electronics company as it faces off in a crucial, three-way war with Nintendo and Microsoft.

Sony Corp., which has fallen behind in key products like flat-panel TVs and digital music players, badly needs a best-seller in the PS3. The console went on sale here to hoards of eager fans over the weekend, ahead of its U.S. release on Friday.

On Tuesday, the company acknowledged the console won’t run some of the 8,000 titles designed for previous PlayStations - even though the PlayStation 3 was billed as being fully compatible with older-generation games.

For instance, the PS3 might not play background music to the popular "Tekken 5" combat game, and some scenes from the "Gran Tourismo" racing game might freeze, according to Sony. The game "Suikoden III" can’t read data from a first-generation PlayStation, while a virtual gun in one of the "Biohazard" games won’t fire properly.

Some older games won’t run on the PS3 at all, according to Sony Computer Entertainment spokesman Satoshi Fukuoka. Online upgrades of the PS3 software will be offered, but it’s unlikely that all the problems will ever get fixed, he said.

Fukuoka insisted that the company anticipated the incompatibilities and outlined them on its Japanese Web site on Nov. 11, when PS3 hit stores here. Microsoft Corp.’s Xbox 360, which debuted last year, has had similar problems with older games.

The PS3’s compatibility problem is the latest in a series of setbacks for the console, which will compete with Nintendo Co.’s Wii and the Xbox 360. The Wii goes on sale Sunday in the U.S.

Sony’s new console was initially promised for worldwide sales for spring this year but was postponed in March to November, and the European sales date has been delayed by another four months. Production problems have also meant only 100,000 PlayStation 3s were available for its debut in Japan over the weekend.

Sony also slashed the price for the cheaper PS3 model in Japan ahead by 20 percent to about $420 in what some critics described as a desperate effort to maintain its dominant market share. The more expensive model with a 60-gigabyte hard drive will cost about $600 in the U.S.

Demand in Japan has been strong. Unlike the lukewarm response here to Microsoft’s Xbox 360, fans have snapped up the PS3, which is powered by the new "Cell" computer chip and supported by the next-generation Blu-ray video disc format to deliver nearly movie-like graphics.

Sony, led by Welsh-born American Howard Stringer, has a lot riding on the PS3. The once-pioneering electronics and entertainment company known for

the Walkman portable audio player and Vaio laptops is in dire need of a hit.

Sony’s brand image also has been badly tarnished by a massive global recall of lithium-ion batteries for laptop computers, which affected almost every major laptop maker in the world, including Dell Inc., Apple Computer Inc. and Lenovo Group Ltd.

Last month, Sony lowered its forecast for its fiscal 2006 group net profit by 38 percent to $680 million, citing costs for the battery recall and PS3 expenses, including the production problems and price cut.

Iconic Sonic Turns 15, Gets Friends

Video game publisher Sega went looking for a new friend for the upcoming version of its popular "Sonic The Hedgehog" game and found a metaphor for its role in the $30 billion games business.

Sonic’s new friend Silver fights villains by using mind-powers to throw objects at enemies in the latest game, unlike Sonic, whose trademark spinning and hurling attacks have made the blue, spiky haired mascot one of the most recognizable game brands in the world.

The company, like Silver, no longer competes directly with video game hardware makers like Sony (6758.T), Microsoft and Nintendo. Sega exited the hardware business about five years ago.

"We’re putting our best properties across all three platforms and letting the battle rage," Scott Steinberg, Sega vice president of marketing, told Reuters in an interview. "Like Silver, we’re using the world."

Sega is refreshing its signature character for a new crop of game consoles, which will become available in the current technology cycle with the release of Sony’s PlayStation 3 and Nintendo’s (7974.OS) Wii this month.

The once mighty Sega dominated the video game industry in the early 1990s with its top selling Genesis game console.

Sonic was born in 1991 and was designed to be the fastest and most technologically advanced video game character for the launch of Sega’s Genesis game system.

Designers imbued the character, who tapped its oversized feet and stared at players if they paused for more than a few seconds, with an attitude that personified the enfant terrible status Sega held at the time.

Some 44 million copies of more than 30 versions of Sonic games have sold globally and few characters are as recognizable to non-gamers. In 1993, scientists who discover a new gene dubbed it the "Sonic Hedgehog homolog." Only Nintendo’s Mario Brothers franchise, which has spawned a live action feature film, is more popular.

The latest game has Sonic embarking on an adventure in Soleanna, a city of water that vaguely resembles the "human world" for the first time, Sega says.

He meets princess Elise, who, of course, gets abducted by Dr. Eggman.

Eggman, like a game villain out of central casting, plots to destroy Soleanna. Violence ensues in the form of Sonic spinning, thrashing, and bouncing his way through richly detailed ancient ruins and waterfalls, according to reviewers.

Players can also spend their time as several other characters including Silver, who's telekinetic powers to move objects and fly, slow down the pace of the game. Silver, according to review site GameSpot, adds greater emphasis on puzzle-solving.

Early previews have been positive. The latest game was "easily the best looking Sonic the Hedgehog game we've ever seen," review site GameSpot wrote after reviewing an early version of the game from May.

"All in all, Sonic appears to be making his way to the next set of platforms in style," according to GameSpot.

Sega plans to release nearly identical versions of "Sonic The Hedgehog" for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 this month, with a different version planned for the Wii early next year.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Windows Vista On Its Way To Manufacturing

After several delays, the long-awaited update to the Windows client OS, Windows Vista, is expected to be on its way to manufacturers Wednesday.

"This is a good day," said Jim Allchin, co-president of Microsoft's Platform & Services Division, on a call to announce Vista's release to manufacturing (RTM). "Vista is rock solid and we're ready to ship."

Allchin also confirmed that Vista will be available to consumers on Jan. 30, which many suspected was the case after online retailer Amazon.com posted that date in August in pre-order listings for the OS.

The IDG News Service reported several weeks ago that the Vista's release to manufacturers (RTM) had been pushed from Oct. 25 to Nov. 8 because a last-minute bug in one of the last builds of Vista had to be repaired.

Once Vista is in the hands of manufacturers, hardware vendors can begin installing it and configuring it on computers that will be sold via retail channels beginning in January 2007, according to Microsoft's current schedule. Microsoft also plans to have Vista in the hands of business customers by the end of November, and is hosting a launch event in New York on Nov. 30 to mark that occasion. The company also will launch Office 2007 and Exchange Server 2007 at that event.

Allchin said he expects business customers will jointly deploy all three of

those products, which will give them "dramatic benefits" in security and reliability.

In fact, he cited security as a primary reason he expects both consumers and businesses to upgrade to Vista. Allchin said Microsoft paid closer attention to security in Vista than it ever has in any other Windows OS.

"In my opinion, it’s the most secure system thata??s available and the most secure system we have shipped," he said. This means the number and severity of security updates Microsoft must release every month on Patch Tuesday, the name security researchers have given for when Microsoft releases its monthly security patches, should be reduced, Allchin said.

"That can be proven," he said of his patch prediction. "We will see about that."

If this bodes true it will be good news for IT administrators, as Microsoft has been releasing a significant number of patches over the last several months to fix security holes in its software. In October Microsoft released 10 patches to fix 26 vulnerabilities, a record number of flaws for the vendor.

Vista has been a long time in the making, and was originally scheduled to hit retail channels this month in time for the busy holiday shopping season. Microsoft is offering coupons through its hardware channel to encourage customers to buy Vista-ready PCs during that time so they can upgrade to Vista when it’s available generally.

Bootleg Versions of Vista and Office 2007 Appear

Reports have surfaced that bootleg copies of Windows Vista and Office 2007 can be obtained from Web sites that offer not only the software itself, but also a working product key and a hack that circumvents Microsoft’s activation system. A product key is a unique number that serves as proof of purchase for Microsoft’s software, which requests the key upon installation. Once installed, both Vista and Office 2007 must be registered with Microsoft over the Internet, at which point Microsoft screens the software to determine its authenticity.

Software that fails the screening might be locked down, giving users access to minimal features, or simply shut down, giving users no access at all.

According to reports, several Web sites selling the pirated software have offered an "activation crack" - a small, additional piece of software that tricks Vista into skipping the registration process once it has been installed on the user’s system. No such hack has been reported for Office 2007, but given the speed at which software pirates operate, such a hack could appear in the coming months or even weeks.

In a prepared statement, Microsoft claimed that pirated copies of Vista and Office 2007 won’t work for long, despite hackers’ attempts.

"This unauthorized download relies on the use of pre-RTM (release to manufacturing) activation keys that will be blocked using Microsoft’s Software Protection Platform," said Microsoft. "Consequently, these downloads will be of limited value."

No matter what their value, the downloads could be flat-out dangerous. Pirated software not only is illegal, but also is often altered or tampered with in ways meant to harm consumers' machines - and even consumers themselves.

"You don't know what you're getting," said John Wolf, director of Internet enforcement for the Business Software Alliance, an antipiracy group whose members include Microsoft, Adobe, and other software giants.

"If you're getting pirated software, most often it's been tampered with," he said. "You're running the risk that they may have made a mistake, or they may have inserted something intentionally that may be malware."

What's more, said Wolf, the damage might not be to your machine alone. If you're on a network, it's not only your system and your workstation that can be affected. Wolfe pointed out that virus attacks and other malicious code that pirates employ are designed to spread quickly, infecting as many machines as possible.

The bottom line? "You're taking a big risk," said Wolf. Illegal software can save pennies, but cost far more in the long run.

EBay In Pact With Baidu To Fend Off Chinese Rivals

Chinese Web search leader Baidu Inc. and Eachnet, the Chinese auction site of eBay Inc., said on Wednesday they had expanded their partnership, one of three such alliances in the world's second biggest Internet market.

Under the agreement, Baidu will promote PayPal Beibao, the online payments service of eBay in China, and will become the exclusive provider of text-based search advertising on the Eachnet auction site.

The Baidu-Eachnet alliance promises to help shore up eBay's business in China, which has struggled over the past year in the face of tough competition. It expands a partnership that began in 2000.

The alliance is a challenge to Chinese auction leader Alibaba.com, a joint venture partner with Yahoo Inc., and another online auction player, Tencent Holdings Ltd., which has a pact with Google Inc.

A trial effort to run online advertising on Eachnet tied to Web search results from Baidu will begin in the 2007 first quarter of 2007. Commercial introduction is set for the second quarter, the companies said in a statement.

Eachnet and Baidu also will develop a co-branded toolbar that users can install on their personal computers for faster access to Web services such as search and auctions.

EBay and Baidu said they do not expect the agreement to have a material impact on their financial results.

"We view it as a modest positive for eBay," Citigroup analyst Mark Mahaney wrote in a note to clients on Wednesday. "This deal could over time modestly reduce eBay's operating losses in China."

Microsoft Can Issue Domain Names

Microsoft can now register top-level Internet domains.

The company has been added to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) list of accredited domain name registrars, according to domain name service provider Dot and Company. This means that Microsoft can now add new top-level domains to the databases used by computers on the Internet.

Microsoft said in a statement Tuesday that the ICANN accreditation "will be helpful and educational for us as policies evolve and we introduce new and improved Internet-based services to our customers."

"Becoming an ICANN-accredited registrar is just one of many ways we can improve our customers' online and search experience," the statement said.

The move is probably related to its Office Live product, which is expected to emerge from its beta testing period on November 15, according to Rich Miller, an analyst with Internet research firm Netcraft.

Microsoft offers free domain name registration to Office Live users and to date the company has been using Melbourne IT for this service. By becoming a registrar in its own right, Microsoft could cut costs, Miller said.

The company is now accredited to register.com,.net,.org,.biz,.info,.name and.pro top-level domains.

Though its status as a registrar makes it possible, Miller does not expect Microsoft to get into a new business selling $7 per year domain name registrations.

"The most sensible approach for them is do what they're doing with Office Live," Miller said. "Use the domain name to establish the relationship and then offer additional services."

Being a registrar also gives Microsoft better access to the top-level domain databases and could help the company improve its Live Search product, Miller said.

Google has also become a domain name registrar so that it can quickly determine when domains have changed hands and then adjust their search ranking accordingly, he said.

Microsoft did not say how its accreditation would affect its relationship with Melbourne IT, but company representatives say it has "no plans to become active domain registrar at this time."

Sun Sets Java Mascot Free

Not only has Sun Microsystems announced plans to open-source its Java platform, the company also has announced that it has open-sourced Duke, the Java mascot. Duke, a regular at Sun's annual JavaOne events and the accompanying icon representing Java, is now freely available for use by developers and Java users at large.

"On Nov. 13, 2006, Sun announced that Duke would become Free Graphics, just as the implementations of Java ME [Micro Edition] and SE [Standard Edition] became Free Software," Sun said on a Web page describing the open-sourcing of Duke. Sun releases all versions of Java. Read more here.

"What does 'Open Source Duke' mean?" Sun asked on the page. "It means all you Duke fans have the original mascot for Java technology to play with. All we ask is that you treat Duke with the same respect that Sun has."

Sun said Duke was originally created by Joe Palrang to be the "agent" for the Green Project at Sun. The Green Project is the name of the Sun project that spawned Java. "Duke became the Java mascot when Java technology was first announced, right around the same time that the first Java cup logo was commissioned," Sun said.

In a blog post on Nov. 13, James Gosling, the creator of Java wrote: "I'm really happy that after months of arguing and analysis, we finally agreed on using the GPL version 2 with the classpath exception as the license for JavaSE. We're also taking the first couple of baby steps in getting actual source code re-licensed.

All of it will follow, eventually. But there's a lot of work to do, like migrating millions of lines of code from TeamWare to Mercurial."

More College Students Taking Web Courses

Roughly one in six students enrolled in higher education - about 3.2 million people - took at least one online course last fall, a sharp increase defying predictions that online learning growth is leveling off.

A new report scheduled for released Thursday by The Sloan Consortium, a group of colleges pursuing online programs, estimates that 850,000 more students took online courses in the fall of 2005 than the year before, an increase of nearly 40 percent. Last year, the group had reported slowing growth, prompting speculation the trend had hit a ceiling.

"The growth was phenomenal," said Jeff Seaman, Sloan's CIO and survey director, who also serves as co-director of the Babson College survey research group. "It's higher in absolute numbers and higher in percentages than anything we've measured before. And it's across the board," at schools ranging from doctoral institutions to those offering associate's degrees to for-profit colleges.

Some online programs have flopped, and several for-profit universities have seen their share prices slump in the last two years amid concern over online's growth prospects. Shares of Apollo Group, which owns the giant for-profit University of Phoenix and is now embroiled in a stock-option scandal, are more than half off their 52-week high.

Still, many universities are investing heavily in online learning, hoping the model will prove more economical than traditional classes, thus expanding their reach. A recent survey by Eduventures, a consulting and research firm, found 50 percent of consumers who expected to enroll in a higher education program said they would prefer to get at least some of their instruction online.

About 80 percent of online students are undergraduates, and they are generally older and more likely to be working and have families. But only about half are pursuing online degrees, according to Eduventures.

The rest are taking individual online courses or - increasingly - mixing online courses with more traditional campus-based classes. One reason online enrollment may be growing is that the difference between traditional and online classes is blurring. It’s not unusual now for traditional classes to post syllibi and homework assignments online or to have class discussions in group forums. Some classes take place more than 80 percent online, which makes them count as online courses for the Sloan survey.

"That’s bumping up enrollment," said Eduventures senior analyst Richard Garrett.

The Sloan survey results also suggest academic officials are becoming more comfortable with online learning. About 62 percent of chief academic officers said they felt students learned as well or better from online courses as they did in face-to-face ones.

However, that left about 38 percent who found online courses degraded the educational experience. And almost all said they aren’t certain online learning will be more widely adopted. Among the obstacles: online courses take more time and effort to prepare, students need more self-discipline, and faculty often aren’t convinced online learning is worthwhile.

Officials at the schools surveyed "all acknowledge that there are significant barriers," Seaman said. "The question is going to be when do those barriers kick in and how do they cope with them."

Lycos Seeks Rebirth As "Virtual Living Room"

Lycos Inc., a U.S. Internet portal that survived the bursting of the late 1990s dot-com bubble, plans to resurrect itself as a teen broadband video channel with a built-in text chat room.

Having missed much of the explosive growth of its rivals Google Inc. and Yahoo Inc., Lycos, now part of the second largest Korean Internet portal Daum Communications Corp. will launch a high-speed Internet video channel this week and let viewers watch movies simultaneously across the Internet and discuss them.

The service, called Lycos Cinema (http://cinema.lycos.com/) aims to combine two tenets of new Internet businesses - online video and social networking, embodied by popular sites YouTube Inc. and News Corp.’s MySpace social network.

The ability to upload your own videos will come as early as December or early next year, Lycos Chief Operating Officer Brian Kalinowski told Reuters in an interview on Friday.

"The technology we’ve created allows for the virtual living room," Kalinowski said.

Lycos said it is using proprietary technology to enable viewers to watch synchronized videos on the Web. The company compared its ability to offer such a service with massive, never-ending online games such as Warcraft

and Second Life, which host hundreds of thousands of players.

Lycos users will be able to watch films and create public chatrooms to invite other potential viewers. Viewers in any one particular viewing room can type comments on the window, while watching the movies that are streamed at the same time.

Kalinowski said its service differs from others as it offers feature length films, unlike YouTube, which limits uploaded videos to about 10 minutes. But he is the first to admit that the roster of films at launch leaves much to be desired. Relatively unknown films including "Legit," "Munich Mambo," and "Triple Threat," are among the 500 titles available at launch.

Kalinowski said it has licensed about 1,000 titles and is in negotiations to obtain 3,000 more.

Lycos also plans to launch an online video service featuring television programming and another service that lets users rent or buy obscure films.

One analyst who viewed the pre-launch service said Lycos may have more success courting other businesses to use the company’s technology.

"They’re trying to position this not just as a portal, but (a service for) potential partners who might be interested in licensing their platforms," Parks Associates analyst Michael Cai said. "Content might not be the most important." Kalinowski said it is working with a major music label to launch a new artist on the service. Users will be able to chat with the artists and watch the video at the same time. He declined to name the company.

Cai said such a service could be interesting to an online dating service such as Match.com, which could let its users go on virtual movie dates before meeting in person.

"We put together a video player, tied in with a chat and we’re using what Barry Diller (IAC/InterActiveCorp CEO) calls ’hybrid content."’ Kalinowski said. "We have text, multimedia playing and real time chat."

Kalinowski’s reference to Diller is ironic. Diller’s company attempted to buy a majority stake in Lycos at the height of the dot-com boom in 1999 for an estimated $4 billion. But investors rejected the deal.

It was purchased for $12.5 billion by Terra Networks a year later, and sold to Korea’s Daum for about $95 million in 2004.

"This is an effort to become cool again, in the Web 2.0 era," Cai said.

Microsoft Says Ready To Do More For EU Compliance

Software giant Microsoft said on Wednesday it is ready to do any additional work to comply with a landmark antitrust decision taken by the European Commission.

"Microsoft is committed to full compliance with the Commission’s March 2004 decision," it said in a statement. "We stand ready to do any additional work that is required to comply with the Commission’s decision."

Earlier in the day, the Commission said it wanted Microsoft to provide by next week missing documentation relating to the U.S. software group's compliance with the decision.

Internet Content Filters Fail to Block Sexually Explicit Material

Of the billions of Web pages indexed by Google and MSN, 1.1% are sexually explicit and content filtering software will miss between 8.8% and 60.2% of them, while blocking between 0.4% and 23.6% of "clean" Web pages.

These figures reflect the testimony of Philip Stark, a professor of statistics at the University of California, Berkeley, who submitted his analysis of Internet content filtering in court earlier this year on behalf of the federal government's effort to sustain the Child Online Protection Act (COPA).

Though COPA was ruled unconstitutional, the Supreme Court directed the Philadelphia court hearing the case to evaluate how technology might affect the constitutionality of the statute. Attorneys for the Department of Justice and the American Civil Liberties Union have been addressing this issue since hearings resumed in late October. Arguments are tentatively scheduled to conclude on Monday. A final ruling could take months.

COPA calls penalties of up to $50,000 per day and up to six months in prison for making material deemed "harmful to minors" available online, regardless its value for adults.

The government's argument, supported by Stark's analysis, is that content filtering doesn't work and that COPA, signed into law in 1998 by President Clinton but never enforced, is thus necessary to protect minors online.

In documents released on Monday, Stark estimates the prevalence of sexual content on the Web, based samples of 50,000 Web sites from Google's search index and 1 million Web sites from MSN's search index that were obtained by government subpoena.

Google, which fought the government's demand for information, won the right to withhold user search queries but was required provide a sample of its index. AOL, MSN, and Yahoo provided the government with an undisclosed number of search queries from different one week periods over the summer of 2005.

Stark's findings include: 1.1% of the Google and MSN indexes consist of sexually explicit pages; of these, 44.2% in the Google index and 56.7% in the MSN index are hosted in the U.S.; 6% of Web searches retrieve at least one sexually explicit Web page; and 1.7% of search results are sexually explicit.

Using unconfirmed estimates that Google's index contains about 24 billion documents, Stark's figures suggest that there are at least 264 million sexually explicit Web pages on the Net.

Among the 500 most popular search terms listed in the 20 million queries inadvertently released by AOL over the summer, "porn" and "sex" ranked 41st and 43rd respectively, according to a list published at DontDelete.com. (The most popular search term in the AOL data set is "Google.")

While Stark’s analysis of filter performance appears to support the government’s contention that COPA is necessary to do what technology can’t, ACLU attorney Catherine Crump argues that the government hasn’t met its burden of showing that "this flawed law is more effective than Internet filtering technology."

The government must prove that COPA serves a compelling government interest, that the law is tailored narrowly enough not to suppress protected speech, and that there are no alternatives that are less restrictive of the right to free speech.

One less restrictive, more effective alternative, suggests Crump, involves keeping computers in a central location in the home, where kids can be monitored. She also says the government could safeguard children through better-crafted laws and public information campaigns to educate parents.

"COPA would chase a tremendous amount of valuable speech off the Net," Crump says, citing as an example the pictures of torture and sexual abuse at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, which could easily be deemed "harmful to minors."

Beyond its constitutional failings, Crump says COPA is behind the times, noting that it doesn’t apply to Web sites overseas or sexual content that’s distributed by some means other than the Web, such as peer-to-peer or IM networks.

Enjoy Watching Grass Grow? Join The Dull Men’s Club

Looking for safe excitement? November is fig month at the Dull Men’s Club, a place in cyberspace for men who feel "born to be mild" and enjoy watching grass grow and photographing garden sheds.

"Figs are good for you. High fiber and high nutritional value ... fat-free, sodium-free, cholesterol-free ... not to mention the great taste. And they are portable," enthuses the Dull Men’s Club Web site (http://www.dullmen.com) just above its choice of "Anorak of the Month."

While the rest of the Web teems with hazards - Trojans, viruses, bots, phishers, spyware and other people - this monochrome haven boasts "no violence or scary scenes" and does its best to exclude exclamation marks.

Instead, an analysis of baggage carousels at 376 airports globally discovers that 44.8 percent rotate counterclockwise, 29 percent clockwise. The site also reveals the reason for that orientation.

"Many people - corporate executives and celebrities I’ve heard about - enjoy doing the dull things," the site’s author Lee Carlson, also known as Grover Click, told Reuters.

"It’s an ordinary subject taken to extremes. Here’s one: take a bucket, fill it with water, put in some wood, and watch it warp."

For the Dull Men’s Club, watching water freeze is stimulus enough, as is discovering the history of soap.

One of the more adventurous pastimes for members is "Binge Flossing" - partly because it is "an inexpensive thing to do on a date."

Visiting museums is a favorite dull men’s activity, and the site contains references to a plethora of resources, from safety razors through aprons to water hydrants, via a comb museum in China and Jerusalem’s Tax Museum.

"One of the museum’s purposes was to be a place to learn about the routine work of the tax department. Wow ... it doesn’t get much better than that," enthuses the site.

Women are excluded from the site’s host society, the "National Council of Dull Men, Washington, D.C."

Carlson - a semi-retired former tax accountant - founded the society with a few friends along the lines of gentlemen’s clubs in London and New York, to share common interests.

"Our view is that women are not dull. Women are exciting. Moreover, we think women would be offended if we said they were dull ... that it would be politically incorrect to refer to women as being dull," the site says.

"We also question what they might do if they were in one of our meeting rooms. The first thing they probably would do is rearrange the furniture. We like our furniture where it already is."

U.S. Firm’s Anti-gay E-mail Sparks Online Fury

A U.S. landscaping firm has been inundated with hate mail after an e-mail it sent rejecting a client because he was gay was made public.

Houston-based firm Garden Guy sent an e-mail on October 18 turning down a prospective customer by saying: "I need to tell you that we cannot meet with you because we choose not to work for homosexuals."

The recipient, Michael Lord, forwarded the e-mail to dozens of friends and it spread across the Internet.

Garden Guy’s web site (www.garden-guy.com) makes no secret of the firm’s outlook. "The God-ordained institution of marriage is under attack," it says at the bottom of a page offering patios and organic pest control, and asks browsers to go to www.nogaymarriage.com.

The forum on Garden Guy’s Web site has received 26 pages of postings since the e-mail was made public, many of them criticizing the owners’ stance and urging a boycott. One accused the company of "hate and discrimination."

Garden Guy co-owner Sabrina Farber said her family had also received verbal attacks and murder threats.

"When we sent (the e-mail) we intended it for the client. We did not intend it to be some sweeping political statement for the world. That’s it," she said. "We are humbly sorry for the hurt that it caused. We meant no hate."

Farber said she had not anticipated the impact that the e-mail would have. "We felt that it was our right as an American small business to choose who we do business with," she said in a telephone interview.

"Do I want to say that before you send an e-mail you might think about the fact the whole world can see it? I guess I do," she added.

Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Electronic Privacy Information Center, said those who send business e-mails should not normally be entitled to expect them to remain private.

He said exceptions that would stand up before communication privacy laws were communications between doctors and patients or lawyers and clients, where confidentiality was expected.

Google Accidentally Sends Out Kama Sutra Worm

Google accidentally sent out e-mail containing a mass mailing worm to about 50,000 members of an e-mail discussion list focused on its Google Video Blog, the company said Tuesday.

"On Tuesday evening, three posts were made to the Google Video Blog-group that should not have been posted," Google said in a statement, posted late Tuesday night.

"Some of these posts may have contained a virus called W32/Kapser.A@mm - a mass mailing worm. If you think you have downloaded this virus from the group or an e-mail message, we recommend you run your antivirus program to remove it," said the statement, which was attributed to the Google Video Team.

W32/Kasper.A@mm is better known as the Kama Sutra worm. Discovered in January of this year, it deletes files and registry keys on affected systems. It is blocked by most antivirus software.

Google uses its Video Blog group to let subscribers know when "interesting and fun" videos have been highlighted on the Google Video Blog. E-mail to the group’s mailing list are posted by a handful of Google employees, called Google Video Team.

This team was responsible for sending out the malicious e-mail Tuesday night, said Gabriel Stricker, a Google spokesman.

Stricker did not have any more details on how Google ended up distributing the worm code, but he said that internal protocols are now in place to prevent this from happening again.

Google has seen a growing number of technical glitches lately, something observers are attributing to the company’s break-neck growth over the past few years. One month ago, hackers found a way to publish a fake post on Google’s official blog. The company also experienced service disruptions with its Blogger service recently that have left some users fuming.

Still, Google isn’t the only company to accidentally distribute malware on a mailing list, according to Graham Cluley, a senior technology consultant with security vendor Sophos. "Even mailing lists run by security firms have sometimes accidentally had malware posted to them," he said in an e-mail interview. "But everyone can learn a lesson."

IE7 Will Fight Phishers with ’Green for Go’ Feature

The world’s most popular Web browser will be turning green next year, at least, that is, when users of Microsoft’s Internet Explorer 7 are surfing legitimate Web sites.

As part of IE7’s new security features, the address bar on the Web browser will turn green to signal surfers when they have beached on a safe site. The "green idea" comes out of recent guidelines created by the CA Browser Forum, an organization of companies that issue SSL certificates for Web sites and major browser makers.

Microsoft decided to adopt the policy for its latest version of Internet Explorer, which was released last month, although the "green" feature won’t be commercially available until 2007.

The new safety color scheme will be activated for Web sites that have obtained an "extended validation SSL certificate," or EV SSL. So far, only businesses are being included in the certification program, according to the software giant. "This is a solid step in fighting phishing scams," said Mukul Krishna, an analyst with Frost & Sullivan. "It is part of an overall strategy to provide the user with a safer Internet experience."

"Phishing" refers to the criminal practice of fishing for confidential personal information and then using that data to access the victim’s financial accounts and even steal that person’s identity. Because phishing scams rely on innocent consumers visiting phony Web sites that imitate the look of legitimate sites, it is important for people to be able to differentiate imposters from the real thing.

Microsoft began the gradual rollout of the IE7 browser on October 18 as an optional download from its Web site. The automatic update from IE6 to IE7 began on November 14, through Windows Update, and will proceed over the next three months. According to Microsoft, everyone who has Automatic Updates enabled in Windows XP will receive a notice by January 2007 to install IE7.

The slow rollout has made the download available to approximately one million PCs a day in an effort to limit the impact of the new software on tech support departments and network administrators.

Krishna noted that Internet Explorer 7 is smartly designed to offer an increased range of security enhancements and additional functionality over earlier versions of Internet Explorer.

"Users really like the new interface, and how they [Microsoft] have reduced a lot of that clutter," Krishna said.

Krishna credits the improved safety features and user interface of IE7 partially to the increasing competition coming from alternative Web browsers, such as Mozilla’s Firefox and Opera Software’s browser.

"The usability is a big step forward," said Krishna, who also cited features such as tabbed browser windows and the continued development of antiphishing initiatives as positive additions.

As part of the phased rollout, Microsoft said the European and Arabic language versions of IE7 are expected to be released in the next few weeks. Asian language and Hebrew versions should be ready by June 2007.

Major Browsers Battle Over Which One Fights Phishing Better

In the ongoing battle between the two leading Internet browsers, Mozilla has fired a shot at Microsoft. The open-source browser used the results of a company-sponsored study to claim that the antiphishing filter in its Firefox 2 software more accurately flags potential phishing attacks than does the one in its rival's Internet Explorer 7.

The move comes after Microsoft in late September released data in support of its assertion that IE 7's phishing filter is superior to competing offerings, including those from Mozilla, McAfee, and EarthLink. That claim was based on tests by an independent research group.

Mozilla tapped independent consulting firm SmartWare to test the effectiveness of Firefox 2's Phishing Protection feature, the company said. According to Mozilla, SmartWare's concluded from its testing that Firefox 2's antiphishing feature is "more effective" than IE 7's.

In the tests, Firefox blocked 820 phishing sites (out of a total of 1040 sites) when running in local mode, a 78.85 percent success rate, the new study found. Local mode checks a list of known phishing URLs (uniform resource locators) stored locally in the browser. When running through Ask Google, which can check URL phishing site lists that are updated online, Firefox 2 blocked 848 sites, upping its success rate to 81.54 percent.

When running in a mode with its antiphishing filter's auto-check turned off, IE 7 blocked 16 phishing sites, a 1.54 percent success rate, according to Mozilla's study. With auto-check turned on, IE 7 blocked 690 sites, giving it success in 66.35 percent of all cases.

The study found 243 instances where Firefox blocked a phishing site and IE did not, and 117 instances where IE blocked a phishing site, but Firefox did not, the study found. In 65 instances, neither browser's antiphishing filter blocked the predatory site.

SmartWare conducted the comparison tests between Firefox 2 and IE 7 over two weeks, from October 19 to November 11, using phishing URLs collected by a service called PhishTank via its public XML (Extensible Markup Language) feed of phishing URLs. PhishTank allows community participants to submit and verify phishing URLs. For the tests, SmartWare downloaded the feed once per hour, and added any newly listed phishing URLs to the testing database.

The browsers were running on Windows XP machines, Mozilla said.

Microsoft has published its analysis of how IE 7's antiphishing filter stacks up against Mozilla and others, on the company's IE 7 team blog for the product. Microsoft hired 3 Sharp LLC to conduct its study.

'Pump-and-Dump' Spam Surge Linked to Russian Bot Herders

The recent surge in e-mail spam hawking penny stocks and penis enlargement pills is the handiwork of Russian hackers running a botnet powered by tens

of thousands of hijacked computers.

Internet security researchers and law enforcement authorities have traced the operation to a well-organized hacking gang controlling a 70,000-strong peer-to-peer botnet seeded with the SpamThru Trojan.

According to Joe Stewart, senior security researcher at SecureWorks, in Atlanta, the gang functions with a level of sophistication rarely seen in the hacking underworld.

For starters, the Trojan comes with its own anti-virus scanner, a pirated copy of Kaspersky's security software, that removes competing malware files from the hijacked machine. Once a Windows machine is infected, it becomes a peer in a peer-to-peer botnet controlled by a central server. If the control server is disabled by botnet hunters, the spammer simply has to control a single peer to retain control of all the bots and send instructions on the location of a new control server.

The bots are segmented into different server ports, determined by the variant of the Trojan installed, and further segmented into peer groups of no more than 512 bots. This allows the hackers to keep the overhead involved in exchanging information about other peers to a minimum, Stewart explained.

Stewart, a reverse engineering expert with expertise in deconstructing malware samples, gained access to files from a SpamThru control server and found evidence that the attackers are meticulous about keeping statistics on bot infections around the world.

For example, the SpamThru controller keeps statistics on the country of origin of all bots in the botnet. In all, computers in 166 countries are part of the botnet, with the United States accounting for more than half of the infections. The botnet stats tracker even logs the version of Windows the infected client is running, down to the service pack level. One chart commandeered by Stewart showed that Windows XP SP2 (Service Pack 2) machines dominate the makeup of the botnet, a clear sign that the latest version of Microsoft's operating system is falling prey to attacks.

Another sign of the complexity of the operation, Stewart found, was a database hacking component that signaled the ability of the spammers to target its pump-and-dump scams to victims most likely to be associated with stock trading.

Stewart said about 20 small investment and financial news sites have been breached for the express purpose of downloading user databases with e-mail addresses matched to names and other site registration data. On the bot herder's control server, Stewart found a MySQL database dump of e-mail addresses associated with an online shop.

"They're breaking into sites that are somewhat related to the stock market and stealing e-mail address from those databases. The thinking is, if they get an e-mail address for someone reading stock market and investment news, that's a perfect target for these penny stock scams," Stewart said in an interview with eWEEK.

The SpamThru spammer also controls lists of millions of e-mail addresses harvested from the hard drives of computers already in the botnet. "This gives the spammer the ability to reach individuals who have never published their e-mail address online or given it to anyone other than personal contacts," Stewart explained.

"It’s a very enterprising operation and it’s interesting that they’re only doing pump-and-dump and penis enlargement spam. That’s probably because those are the most lucrative," he added.

Even the spam messages come with a unique component. The messages are both text- and image-based and a lot of effort has been put into evading spam filters. For example, each SpamThru client works as its own spam engine, downloading a template containing the spam and random phrases to use as hash-busters, random "from" names, and a list of several hundred e-mail addresses to send to. Stewart discovered that the image files in the templates are modified with every e-mail message sent, allowing the spammer to change the width and height. The image-based spam also includes random pixels at the bottom, specifically to defeat anti-spam technologies that reject mail based on a static image.

All SpamThru bots, the botnet controls about 73,000 infected clients, are also capable of using a list of proxy servers maintained by the controller to evade blacklisting of the bot IP addresses by anti-spam services. Stewart said this allows the Trojan to act as a "massive distributed engine for sending spam," without the cost of maintaining static servers.

With a botnet of this size, the group is theoretically capable of sending a billion spam e-mails in a single day. "This number assumes one recipient per message, [but] in reality, most spams are delivered in a single message with multiple recipients at the same domain, so the actual number of separate spams landing in different inboxes could be even higher," Stewart said.

According to data from Barracuda Networks, an enterprise security appliance vendor in Mountain View, Calif., there has been a 67 percent increase in overall spam volume and a 500 percent increase in image spam since Aug. 2006.

Stephen Pao, vice president of product management at Barracuda Networks, echoed Stewart’s findings, noting that the bulk of the spam is linked to the trading of penny stocks. "Across the board, we are observing more spam and more sophistication in sending the spam," Pao said.

Court Shuts Down Alleged Spyware Operation

A U.S. district court has shut down a Web operation that is accused of secretly loading spyware and other malevolent software onto millions of computers after promising users free screen savers and video files, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission said on Monday.

Judge Howard McKibben of the U.S. District Court for the District of Nevada issued a temporary restraining order against ERG Ventures and an affiliate on October 31, and an FTC complaint seeks a permanent injunction against the company and affiliate.

The FTC accused ERG Ventures and an affiliate with tricking consumers into downloading a piece of spyware called Media Motor, which installs itself and downloads other malware.

The malware was difficult for consumers to remove, the FTC said. The malware installed by Media Motor:

*Changed consumers' home pages
*Added difficult-to-remove toolbars that display disruptive pop-up ads in consumers' Internet browsers
*Tracked Internet activity
*Generated disruptive pop-up ads that were occasionally sexually explicit
*Added advertising icons to consumers' Windows desktop
*Degraded computer performance
*Disabled antispyware and antivirus software

Deceptive EULA ERG Ventures and its affiliate Timothy P. Taylor - doing business as Team Taylor Made - have violated the FTC Act, which bars unfair and deceptive practices, the FTC charged. ERG Ventures and Taylor failed to disclose to consumers that the free software they offered was bundled with malware, and they used a deceptive end user license agreement, which gave consumers the option to halt the installation of all software from ERG, but secretly installed the malware anyway, the FTC said.

The FTC will ask the court to order the defendants to give up their illegal gains, the agency said.

The FTC complaint names ERG Ventures, doing business as ERG Ventures LLC2, Media Motor, Joysticksavers.com, and PrivateinPublic.com, and its principal operators, Elliott S. Cameron, Robert A. Davidson II, and Gary E. Hill, as well as Taylor. The FTC also asked consumers who have had experience with the defendants to contact the agency with any information that may be relevant to the FTC's lawsuit.

Man Jailed For Britain's First "Web-Rage" Attack

A British man convicted of what has been described as the country's first "web-rage" attack, was jailed for 2-1/2 years on Friday for assaulting a man he had exchanged insults with over the Internet.

Paul Gibbons, 47, from south London, admitted he had attacked John Jones in December 2005 after months of exchanging abuse with him via an Internet chatroom dedicated to discussing Islam.

The Old Bailey heard that Gibbons had "taken exception" to Jones, 43, after he had made the claim that Gibbons had been "interfering with children."

After several more verbal and written exchanges - with Jones threatening to track him down and give him a severe beating - Gibbons and a friend went to his victim's house in Essex, armed with a pickaxe and machete.

Jones himself was armed with a knife but Gibbons took it off him, held it to his throat and "scratched" him across the neck.

Gibbons, who the court heard had previous convictions for violence, admitted unlawful wounding on the first day of his trial last month.

Other charges of attempted murder and issuing online threats to kill four other chatroom users were not pursued but could be reactivated in future if he reoffends.

Media reports said it was the country's first case of "web-rage" and

Judge Richard Hawkins described the circumstances as "unusual."

"This case highlights the dangers of Internet chat rooms, particularly with regards to giving personal details that will allow other users to discover home addresses," said Detective Sergeant Jean-Marc Bazzoni of Essex Police.

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